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Reading the word in a foreign tongue: Islam's scripture and non-Arab Muslims[†]

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Observant Muslims strive to live in accordance with the teachings of our scripture, the Qur'an. However, the vast majority of Muslims is neither literate nor Arab and cannot understand Arabic, the language of the Qur'an's revelation. Thus, we rely on dominant interpretations and translations of it in our own languages. Yet, Muslims also believe that the translated Qur'an is not the "real" Qur'an. What does it mean, then, for Muslims to encounter our sacred text in a foreign tongue? As a non-Arabic speaker, I grapple with this conundrum by giving examples from my own life, as well as my work on Qur'anic hermeneutics. In the process, I touch on some of the themes in the conference's description about language, identity, and translation.

Keywords: Qur'an; Qur'anic hermeneutics; patriarchy; sexual differentiation; antipatriarchal; difference

1. Introduction

I am delighted to have been invited to be a plenary speaker at the ILA's 63rd annual conference although I will confess straightaway to feeling rather nervous. To talk to linguists when I'm not one myself seems a bit reckless, especially when I intend to detail the practical and – I would say, existential – consequences of *not* knowing a specific language. This is Arabic, the language of Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, and why it matters to a Muslim like me not to understand it is the subject of my talk, as you can probably tell from its title. However, if this leaves little to your imaginations as to what I will be speaking about, it says equally little about how or why I intend to do so. Accordingly, I will start with some clarifications and caveats.

One is that I will be exploring the intersections of language and religion not only as an academic who has a theoretical interest in Qur'anic hermeneutics but also as an observant Muslim who has felt caught in the hinges of these intersections for much of my life. Some of my comments, therefore, are going to be autobiographical. Second, I find it difficult to share the conference's rather secular view of religion as basically a system of in-group and out-group identities, rituals, liturgies, and interpretation. After all, one could say the same about secularism; that it, too, is a system of

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self-and-other differentiation, with its insides and outsides, ideological borders and boundaries, hermeneutical conventions and protocols, liberal conversion projects and liturgies of Western exceptionalism and civilizational virtues. As I see it, then, the only thing of significance that sets religious and secular believers apart is that the former acknowledge the presence of the divine in their lives. The Qur'ān calls this ineffable sense of God-consciousness "*taqwa*" and it is this consciousness that permeates both my faith and my work. You're therefore going to be hearing more God-talk than you're accustomed to doing or feel comfortable doing and, for this, I seek your indulgence at the outset.

Lastly, instead of a linear or rigorous analysis of language or religion, I will be offering discrete vignettes on three conference themes: the "universal notion of a bond between speech and worship," the use of religion as political language – and I will focus on sexual politics – and the translation of sacred texts. My focus throughout will be on Islam and so, before I say more about these themes, I would like to make some general points about it.

2. Language and worship

One is that, as the youngest of the Abrahamic religions, Islam embraces all the Hebrew prophets as its own though it's not easy to see this scriptural link between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam because of the tendency to classify the first two as Western religions and Islam as "other." However, if it's geography we are interested in, then they are *all* Middle Eastern.

Second, in Islam, God is one, uncreated, incomparable, and un-representable, and the Qur'ān even forbids using similitude for God. At a minimum, this suggests that God is beyond categories like sex/gender as well. (Here I should say that I take the Qur'ān's own references to God as "He" to be linguistic conventions and not statements about divine ontology.) Third, the Qur'ān is considered to be God's sacred and inerrant word that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in seventh century Arabia. And, while it is in Arabic, the Qur'ān says this is because God wished to address the Arabs; it never says that Arabic itself is the language of the sacred.

According to Muslim tradition the first word of revelation was *Iqra*, or "read!" Now, although the Prophet was an Arab, he was also unlettered, so the story goes that when he heard this command, he protested "But, I cannot read!" This may be why some translators render *Iqra* as "recite" or "proclaim." My favorite translator is Muhammad Asad, who was born a Jew in Austria-Hungary in 1900 and who converted to Islam when he was twenty-six. He was a linguist, a writer, a traveler and one of the most influential Muslim scholars of his time. (Please note that the word he translates as "man" means human): "Read! In the name of thy Sustainer, who has created – created man out of a germ-cell. Read – for thy Sustainer is the most bountiful one, who has taught man the use of the pen – taught man what he did not know."¹

The first point of contact between God and believers is thus a single word, and then a stream of words, and there's no escaping this logocentrism. While God is not incarnated in God's word, it is not possible to know one without the other. This is a key premise of Islamic theology and my own theological hermeneutics and it is also the key dilemma in my life because, while I can read the Qur'ān in Arabic, I don't understand it. Yet, I have proposed – or, as my critics would say, have had the *nerve* to

propose – a liberatory Qur’ānic hermeneutics that allows Muslims to press for women’s equality. I would, therefore, like to unpack this paradox a bit.

I was born in Pakistan almost seventy years ago and, when I was ten or so, was taught to read the Qur’ān in Arabic. This is customary in many families but what is striking about mine is that my parents did not read Arabic themselves and nor did they practice Islam in the way in which all four of their children now do. In fact, they were quite Westernized since they had been educated in Catholic convents run by European nuns and in Presbyterian colleges in what was then British India. My siblings and I also attended Catholic convents and my sisters and I graduated from my mother’s alma mater; she was one of a handful of Muslim women who had gotten a B.A. in the 1940s. We were the only Pakistani family I knew who spoke English as our first language at home. Perhaps precisely because our colonialist-missionary education hadn’t taught us about our own language or religion or history, my parents decided that we should at least learn the Qur’ān. So, my father, who was an army officer, had his battalion’s maulvi (“the mullah”) come to our home to teach us the Qur’ān although, as we were to discover over the years, none of the men knew Arabic themselves. We thus spent years reading a text that neither the teacher and nor his pupils understood until, one day, my mother put an abrupt end to it all. It seems she had overheard the maulvi terrifying my youngest sister with gruesome stories about hell because she was wearing bangles.

Some years after this unceremonious end to my encounter with the Arabic Qur’ān, I came across two English translations in my father’s library both of which were also by male converts though neither one of them was Asad. Him I was to discover much later in life by which time I had also come to know that most Muslims don’t think the translated Qur’ān is *real*. This amounts to saying that, if one cannot read God’s word in Arabic, one cannot know God since the Qur’ān is the “methodology of ascent to God,”² as the great Sudanese scholar, M.M. Taha (1987), once put it. However, the problem with sacralizing Arabic in this fashion is that Arabs are a tiny minority of the world’s one billion Muslims, and literate Muslims are an even tinier one. In Pakistan, for instance, when I was growing up, the literacy rate – and I use the word loosely – was around thirteen or fourteen percent.

But, even if one *is* literate, most Muslims believe that only the religious knowledge that was produced in the first few Islamic centuries is canonical; this includes both scriptural exegesis and Muslim laws. And, the canon is, of course, the work of a small group of men. I suppose, in this, Muslim history is hardly aberrant but it remains somewhat inexplicable since the Qur’ān does not allow for a clergy or formal interpretive communities. Indeed, it *forbids* intermediaries between God and believers and says each one of us must use our own *aql* and *ilm*, intellect and knowledge, to decipher God’s signs; in Arabic the word for signs is *ayat* which also refers to Qur’ānic verses. If such references to *ilm* seem to suggest that religion is the preserve only of the literati, then the Qur’ān dashes this illusion by saying that it came also for the unlettered Bedouin in the desert. In fact, as the Prophet’s own example shows, one does not need to be literate to respond to God’s call. Yet, today, knowledge of Islam is monopolized by a handful of mostly Arab, or Arabic-speaking, men who ritually conflate linguistic knowledge with epistemic privilege. As a result, it is very difficult to challenge dominant interpretations of the Qur’ān or of Muslim law, especially if one is a woman. However, starting in the early 1990s, this is precisely what a group of Muslim women living in the U.S. began to do and I count myself among these. My

journey to this point was not seamless, of course, and it might not have unfolded as it did if I hadn't discovered, firsthand, *how* Muslims read discrimination against women into the Qur'an, opening up the thorny issue of the nexus between religious knowledge and sexual politics.

3. Religious language/ knowledge and sexual politics

Although most Muslims justify women's ill-treatment – though they don't call it ill-treatment – by putting the onus on Islam, the use or abuse of sacred knowledge to oppress them has a complex history, one in which Muslim rulers and states have been complicit from the start.

To take Pakistan's example: the country in which I grew up was very different from the one I left behind in 1983 when a military general, Zia ul Haq, was in power. He had deposed the democratically elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and had pressured the judiciary to order his execution. Perhaps as a way to justify this judicially sanctioned murder and legitimize his own coup, Zia had just embarked on a vigorous program of so-called "Islamization." I say so-called because, as also happens in other Muslim states, Islamization usually means introducing family and personal laws that discriminate against women. You know these as "Shariah laws" but that's a terrible misnomer, if ever there was one, since Shariah is a broad term that refers to a divinely appointed path. The laws Muslims have derived from the Qur'an, on the other hand, are a product of their own legal and exegetical reasoning and are more appropriately called *fiqh*; confusing the two is deadly because, once you say "this is God's law," there can be no further argument against it, at least if one is an unreflective believer.

Among other things, *fiqh* treats the evidence of two women as equaling that of one man. This means that if a woman sees a crime or is its victim, the courts won't admit her testimony unless a second woman corroborates it. This is because one verse in the Qur'an says two women can serve as witnesses to a financial transaction if there is no male witness. But there are other cases of evidence-giving in the Qur'an that have never made it into Muslim law. A significant one is that if a man accuses his wife of adultery on his own witness and she testifies to her innocence, the Qur'an gives him no further legal recourse against her. Yet, the laws that claim to be derived from the Scripture do not reflect its own diversity.

At the time Zia was "Islamizing" Pakistan, however, I wasn't thinking along these lines because I did not then know that *what* we understand the Qur'an to be saying depends on *who* reads it, *how*, and in what social, political, and historical *contexts*. In other words, that there's a relationship between method and meaning and that all texts are polysemic since language itself isn't fixed or transparent. Nor did I understand the equally scandalous fact that many Muslim practices that now seem normal and legal are not mentioned in the Qur'an such as stoning to death, chopping off heads, female genital cutting, forcing women to cover, especially their faces, forced marriages, instantaneous divorces – which some men now pronounce over Instagram and Twitter – and the miserably misnamed "honor" killings.

Then, too, over the years, I was to find out that Muslim laws are based on 0.01% of the Qur'an since there are only five or so verses out of a total of 6,000 that can be read as male-privileging. These hierarchy verses, as some feminists now call them, are read as saying that men are women's guardians, have a degree of superiority over women, can marry multiple wives and even hit a rebellious one, that they are entitled to double

a woman's share in inheritance and their evidence counts for more than women's. But, here's the rub, or, rather, several of them: The word Muslims translate as guardians (*qawwamun*), also denotes financial upkeep; it can thus be read as alluding to men's roles as women's financial providers and not as their moral handlers. In fact, the Qur'ān calls women and men each other's *awliya*, that is, guardians, custodians, and friends. As to the much vaunted "degree" men claim to have over women, it turns out to be only in matters of divorce and it is unclear whether it refers to the husband's right to initiate a divorce or to rescind one. It is also not true that all men can marry multiple wives; to the contrary, more than one marriage is allowed only to those who have been charged to take care of female orphans and only on the condition that they can treat their wives equally. And, since this is unlikely, the Qur'ān explicitly says it is better to marry only one so as not to be partial. As for the word that Muslims translate as "beat" or "strike," it also means to leave, cite (to authorities), separate, and set an example. The Qur'ān itself uses it in a dozen different ways. Moreover, since it describes marriage as a relationship that should be conducive to love and mutual sexual fulfillment, to interpret verse 4:34 as allowing wife-beating creates an anomaly. Lastly, while a brother does inherit twice his sister's share from a parent's estate, mothers and fathers inherit equal shares from their children's. And, as I've already noted, there is no single model for women's and men's testimonies in the Qur'ān.

In short, the meanings of the hierarchy verses change depending on how one translates or interprets words, something that is unlikely to horrify those who study language as a vocation. But the same Muslims who like to boast that Arabic is such a rich language that it has eighty words for "camel," suddenly all agree that, when it comes to the Qur'ān's position on women, Arabic is a fixed, plain-sense, and mono-semantic language.

For obvious reasons, I have bypassed such linguistic quibbles in my own work and have focused, instead, on proposing a methodology for reading the Qur'ān as a liberatory, and, more specifically, an antipatriarchal, text. The theological aspect of my hermeneutics takes it as a given that there is a relationship between divine ontology and discourse, which is why I read the Qur'ān in light of its descriptions of God. To give an example, if the Qur'ān says God is just – and divine justice is defined negatively as God's promise not to transgress against the rights of another (do *zulm*) – then I hesitate to ascribe *zulm* to the Qur'ān's teachings as well. I don't think one needs to agree on the meaning of justice in order to recognize the theological incoherence of professing belief in a just God all the while interpolating injustice into that God's speech.

As my theoretical framework, I take a clear-cut definition of patriarchy since, in the absence of a definition, it seems absurd to insist on Islam's patriarchalism, as its critics do. My own view of patriarchy is as a continuum at one end of which is rule by the father/husband that draws on images of God as father/male, and at the other, a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges men because they are biologically males. Lastly, I read the Qur'ān in light of some interpretive criteria I derive from the text itself. For instance, it warns us not to "tear it into shreds" – which I read as a critique of selective readings – and it insists that the "whole of it" is from God, which I see as a defense of textual holism. It also counsels us to search for "the best" in its meanings which opens up the question of the contextual legitimacy of different readings.

Read within this framework, it is not difficult to make the case that the Qur'ān's episteme is antipatriarchal. This is because, first and foremost, it is the speech of an unsexed/ungendered God who refuses to be called father. This rejection of the patriarchal imaginary of a male God is one way in which the Qur'ān also undercuts theories of father/husband right which draw their legitimacy from representations of God as father/male. Second, the Qur'ān does not advocate the notion of sexual differentiation by which I mean that, though it recognizes biological differences between men and women, it does not assign the differences, or sex itself, any gender symbolism. Thus, not a single verse says that their biology makes women and men unequal. To the contrary, the Qur'ān affirms that God created both from the same self (*nafs*) and made them vice-regents on earth (*khalifa*) and one another's guardians (*awliya*).

These are some of the reasons why I believe the Qur'ān's teachings allow Muslims to challenge the two models of patriarchy I have defined. As to the hierarchy verses, I read them historically, that is, as having been directed to the tribal Arab patriarchy that was the Qur'ān's first audience and which is no more. As such, I contextualize its references to the gender hierarchy of that patriarchy as well. In fact, the Qur'ān itself alludes to "the necessarily periodic and contextual nature" of some of its content, though it took an Anglican bishop, the Rev. Kenneth Cragg (1971: 121–2), to point this out. As he also argued, what turns the "'incidentalism' of the days of the Qur'ān [into] the 'fundamentalism' of the centuries" is the failure to deal with "moving time." It is this failure to distinguish the historically specific from the universal in the Qur'ān that then leads Muslims to regard the hierarchy verses as being eternally normative even though the patriarchy to which they were addressed is now defunct.

This is, of course, a simplified overview of my reading but I just wanted to give some sense of how one can open up the text to different and liberatory meanings. Here, I should also note that, if the absence of sexual differentiation in the Qur'ān has radical implications for how we understand its stance on male privilege, its approach to religious differences has equally radical implications for how Muslims define ourselves in relation to others. Especially given the conference's view of religious identities as seemingly narrowly bounded, I want to end my talk by considering the Qur'ān's stance on religion, identity, and differences.

4. In praise of difference

I will start with what it says about the "word:" "Art thou not aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches towards the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by its Sustainer's leave." And, "[thus it is that] God propounds parables unto [humans], so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth]. And the parable of a corrupt word is that of a corrupted tree, torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth, wholly unable to endure."³ Lastly, "Give, then, this glad tidings to [those of] My servants who listen [closely] to all that is said, and follow the best of it: [for] it is they whom God has graced with ... guidance, and it is they who are [truly] endowed with insight!"⁴ In brief, as both language and revelation, the word expresses our ethics and morality, and here I'm struck by the Qur'ān's counsel to search for the best in it. This not only encourages Muslims to keep re-reading our scripture – while also alerting us to the fact that not all readings may be equally good – but it also illustrates that hermeneutical and ethical choices are necessarily interconnected.

Of course, this is not to say that everyone believes in the Word itself and, while this may worry the self-righteous, the Qur'ān urges restraint in dealing with those who don't: "And tell my servants that they should speak in the most kindly manner [unto those who do not share their beliefs]."⁵ And, "O Moses ... I have chosen thee for Mine Own service. Go forth, [then,] thou and thy brother, with My messages ... unto Pharaoh: for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak unto him in a mild manner, so that he might bethink himself or [at least] be filled with apprehension."⁶ And, "Call thou unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner. ... Hence, if you have to respond to an attack [in argument], respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you: but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for [God is with] those who are patient in adversity."⁷ Naturally, civil discourse, to use a liberal term, can only go so far in resolving conflict. Moreover, believers might wonder how to reconcile their belief in the universality and the universal goodness of God's word with religious differences or with the fact that many people are not religious believers. But, can one believe something to be true and yet resist the urge to proselytize? The Qur'ān seems to anticipate such an eventuality with reference both to Jews and Christians ("they" in the first verse below) and to the idol-worshippers of Mecca (the second): "And if they [try to] argue with thee, say [only]: 'God knows best what you are doing. [For, indeed,] God will judge between you [all] on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which you were wont to differ.'"⁸ And,

Say: o ye
That reject Faith!
I worship not that
Which ye worship.
And I will not worship
That which ye have been
Wont to worship.
Nor will ye worship
That which I worship.
To you be your Way,
And to me mine.⁹

One can certainly read the second verse as foreclosing conversations across differences. But, it can also be read as saying that everyone is free to pursue our own truths. In fact, the Qur'ān is clear that religious diversity is a sign of divine providence and, at best, is meant to enable mutual recognition: "Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of [God]."¹⁰ And, "And among [God's] wonders is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge."¹¹ You will note that the first verse, which speaks about religious diversity, does not privilege any of the Abrahamic religions, whereas the second, which speaks about human diversity, depicts it as encoding certain lessons. One can only guess at what these may be, though at least one is common to Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. It is not in the Qur'ān but one can find it in the work of the famous Muslim Persian poet, Saadi

(1200–1292), who may have been inspired by Jewish commentaries on the Hebrew Bible. However, I've also read that the latter may have borrowed from Saadi. In any event, it is the story of the prophet Avraham's/Abraham's/Ibrahim's tent and this is how Saadi tells it¹²:

One evening, as Avraham is sitting beside his tent, he sees an old man, probably over a hundred years, shuffling slowly toward him. Avraham receives him kindly, washes his feet and feeds him. But, observing that he doesn't pray or seek God's blessings on his meal, asks why he does not worship the God of heaven. To this, the man replies that he worships fire and does not acknowledge any other God. At this, Avraham grows zealously angry and expels him from his tent. After he leaves, God calls to Avraham demanding to know where his guest is and he replies, "I thrust him away because he did not worship thee." God answers, "I have suffered him these hundred years, though he dishonored me, and couldst thou not endure him one night, when he gave thee no trouble?" This is, of course, a commentary on hospitality and tolerance but it is also a cautionary tale about difference, about an obligation that believers owe to God and to strangers to let the stranger *be* a stranger. That is, neither to assimilate and nor to annihilate the other; there is no inside or outside here, no self or other; just pure difference.

These are some of the ways in which I read God's word, on which and in which I dwell in the hope that, as the Qur'an promises, "*everything* reveals its truth in the end."¹³

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. The Germ Cell, 96:1–5, M. Asad (1980), 963.
2. M. M. Taha (1987), 148.
3. Abraham, 14:24–24; Asad, 376.
4. The Throngs; 39:17–18; *ibid.*, 707.
5. The Night Journey, 17:53; *ibid.*, 426.
6. O Man, 20: 41–42; *ibid.*, 473.
7. The Bee, 16:125, *ibid.*, 416.
8. The Pilgrimage, 22:68–69; *ibid.*, 516.
9. Al-Kaffirun, 109; A. Yusuf Ali, 1988.
10. The Private Apartments, 49:13; *ibid.*, 794.
11. The Byzantines, 30:22; Asad., 619.
12. George A. Kohut (1902), 104–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1450500.pdf>
13. The Moon, 54:3; *ibid.*, 818.

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